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First Recording

Glenn Gould
String Quartet, Op. 1

performed by

The Symphonia Quartet



GLENN GOULD String Quartet, Op. 1

The Symphonia Quartet
(Kurt Loebel and Elmer Setzer, violinists;
Tom Brennand, violist;
Thomas Liberti, cellist)

The Quartet was written between 1953-55 at a time when on all my concert programs and at the drop of a conversational hat I thought of myself as a valiant defender of twelve-tone music and of its leading exponents. Thus, an unexpected and thoroughly reasonable question arises—how, in the midst of enthusiasm for the avant-garde movements of the day, could one find a work which would have been perfectly presentable at a turn-of-the-century academy, a work that did not advance the challenge to the laws of tonal gravity more boldly than did the works of Wagner, or Bruckner, or Richard Strauss? Was it perhaps that I was simply imitating a language which was extremely familiar to me and to my audience and would pose no special barriers of communication? Or was I presumptuously and unworthily attempting to recapitulate the thoughts of my musical elders?

In any event, the fact was that to find in the mid-twentieth century a work by a young composer that seemed to evoke reminiscence of Viennese romanticism was a rather startling experience. And the first piano read-through of the work astonished and even shocked friends who had expected from me, perhaps, a work of pointillistic precision. How could I, they protested, with all my professed admiration for Schoenberg and for von Webern, have turned so violently from the cause?

Well, the answer is really quite simple. Unlike many students, my enthusiasms were seldom balanced by antagonisms. My great admiration for the music of Schoenberg, for instance, was not enhanced by any counter-irritation for the Viennese romantics of a generation before Schoenberg. Sadly, today it seems almost inevitable that admiration be the parent of snobbery, and one sees on every hand superbly informed and historically oriented young musicians who are only too eager to tell you what is wrong with all music between 1860 and 1920, who seize every opportunity to isolate the development of twelve-tone writing from nineteenth century tradition. I, for one, have never been willing to admit that any love must be balanced by a concurrent disaffection, that every adoption must cause a rejection, and I preferred to see in Schoenberg and in von Webern composers who rose swiftly without apology from the romantic twilight of tonality, to see in the twelve-tone technique as it existed in the hands of Schoenberg a logical extension of nineteenth century motivic treatment. For me, Schoenberg was not a great composer because he used the twelve-tone system, but rather the twelve-tone system was singularly lucky to have been exploited by a man of Schoenberg's genius.

For some time I had had the urge to write a work in which the achievement of Schoenberg in unifying motivic concepts would be applied to an idiom in which the firm harmonic hand of key relationship would be invited, its discipline acknowledged and the motivic manipulation controlled thereby. Naturally, there would be adjustments to be made—the very nature of the diatonic scale is compromise—but it would be fun, I thought, to see how far one could proceed in extending an absurdly small motive as the nucleus of every thematic strand of the work without, at the same time, violating the harmonic rhythm of the whole. This was not to be a work in which the contrapuntal intrigues stopped the show. They must fit naturally, even spontaneously, into the total plan which, while it ought to be modified and augmented by developments of motivic procedures, should remain recognizably formal.

If this sort of theorizing suggests the same grim resolve with which every composer sets about an exercise in style, I must state that whatever may have been my academic motive initially, within a very few measures I was completely in the throes of this new experience. At once I was writing a work within a harmonic language utilized by composers whom I adored, yet I was working in this language with a kind of contrapuntal independence which I had learned from more recent and, indeed, from much older masters. Hence, I felt myself to be saying something original and my artistic conscience was clear. Whatever I had set out to prove pedagogically it was soon evident that I was not shaping the Quartet—it was shaping me.

The four note motive to which all major thematic developments relate is first heard played by the second violin over a pedal-point of the lower strings (Ex. 1).

During a lengthy introduction it permeates every voice of the Quartet in constantly elaborating patterns (Ex. 2).

The Quartet is, quite simply, an enormously expanded movement taking for its precedent the *sonata-allegro* or classical first movement design. The relation of thematic areas to each other is eminently orthodox (that is, the severity of the F minor tonality is assuaged by secondary thematic groups in A-flat major in the exposition, in F major in the recapitulation) although, needless to say, in a work of this size innumerable plateaux of modulation extend the harmonic orbit considerably.

The principal theme of the exposition proper (Ex. 3) could be described as "arrived at" rather than "derived from" the formative motive (Ex. 1).

By the time of its first appearance in the viola, it represents a complex of many motivic and rhythmic shifts prepared in the introduction. The subsidiary A-flat major group begins with this theme (Ex. 4)

which later expands to join Ex. 3 (Ex. 5).

The central development section is in B minor, as far removed as one can be from the home tonality of F, and takes the independent form of a fugue, followed by a series of chorale-like statements, working back to F minor (Ex. 6).

In the fugue, Ex. 3 appears as counter-subject (Ex. 7).

The recapitulation, which is prefaced by its own fugato-like introduction, is in no sense perfunctory. All of the thematic strands heard previously are present but have grown and mingled contrapuntally (Ex. 8).

The form thus described is preceded by a lengthy introduction of about one hundred measures and followed by a section which, since it consists of some three hundred measures, not even I have the temerity to call "Coda." This latter section is certainly the most unusual feature of the work. Within it the instruments review many of the contrapuntal evolutions induced by the four note motive without literally quoting any of the principle themes identified with the main body of the work (Ex. 9).

This section was conceived on plains of declining dynamic emphasis and although many sub-climaxes are attained, it gradually works back to a harmonization of the imperturbable pedal-point of the opening.

The Quartet represents a part of my musical development which I cannot but regard with some sentiment. It is certainly not unusual to find an Opus 1 in which a young composer inadvertently presents a subjective synthesis of all that has most deeply affected his adolescence ("influenced" is perhaps too determinate a word). Sometimes these prodigal summations are the harbingers of the true creative life. Sometimes the brilliance with which they reflect the past manages to excel all that their composer will do thereafter. In any event, though the system must be cleansed of Opus Ones, the therapy of this spiritual catharsis will not remedy a native lack of invention. It's Opus 2 that counts!

"The foremost pianist this continent has produced in recent decades," wrote critic Alfred Frankenstein about Glenn Gould in *High Fidelity* Magazine. "A pianist of divine guidance," said Jay Harrison in the *New York Herald Tribune*. "He plays Bach," wrote a distinguished critic, Professor Heinrich Neuhaus, "as if he were one of the pupils of the Thomaskirche cantor, sharing his meals with him in the refectory and blowing the organ when his teacher played for his parishioners... The music seems to speak through his playing."

Glenn Gould was born in Toronto, Ontario, in 1932. He began studying music with his mother when he was three, and later entered the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto. At twelve he completed his work there, having earned the highest grades in all Canada, and becoming the youngest graduate in the school's history.

He made his concert debut in 1947 with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and first appeared in the United States in 1955 in Washington, D. C. On this occasion Paul Hume wrote: "Glenn Gould is a pianist with rare gifts for the world... We know of no other pianist anything like him of any age." Shortly after a Town Hall recital, Mr. Gould recorded his now celebrated performance of the *Goldberg Variations* and has continued his career as concert and recording artist to ever-increasing fame, both in America and abroad.

Gould's musical taste is broad. Besides being an acknowledged interpreter of Bach and Beethoven, he has great admiration for Richard Strauss on the one hand and Arnold Schoenberg on the other. And one senses in his Opus 1, the String Quartet, the checks and balances that such interests might create: a refusal to be either vociferously "modern" or self-consciously "romantic." Both elements are in Glenn Gould the pianist and both, too, are in Glenn Gould the composer.

PHOTO: DON HUNSTEIN

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STEREO

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FIRST RECORDING

GLENN GOULD
STRING QUARTET,
Op. 1

MS 6178
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Side 1
XSM 50627

(Beginning)

THE SYMPHONIA QUARTET
(Kurt Loebel and Elmer Setzer, violinists;
Tom Brenmand, violist;
Thomas Liberti, cellist)

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STRING QUARTET,
Op. 1

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(Conclusion)

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(Kurt Loebel and Elmer Setzer, violinists;
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